

WASHINGTON — James Reston

Down With the Press

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The press has been criticized more than usual here lately by such philosophers as Cappy Weinberger at the Pentagon and Bill Casey at the C.I.A. We are, they say, a nosy and cheeky bunch, which is true, always interfering with their good intentions, and deserve to be condemned. Most folks seem to agree and so do I, but for a different reason.

I field the papers on the first bounce at 7 in the morning, and what do I read?

Here is the old and new head of NASA, James Fletcher, complaining that a small number of reporters have acquired a deep and unwarranted suspicion of NASA. He's very disappointed, he says, about the way they reported the Challenger disaster.

More surprising, here's my old buddy Ben Bradlee of The Washington Post, explaining and explaining very well in a couple of thousand well-chosen words that newspaper folk love their country and are very careful not to give away its military secrets or protect the official clowns who are merely trying to protect themselves.

The press should be condemned, for, given the increasing power of the

can remember the names of the people, other than Attorney General Meese.

Carry on then up the hill to the Capitol and the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress, and then slip down the hill to Independence Avenue, where thousands of people work every day on the health and education of our people, and the "regulatory agencies" decide what to do about civil aviation and the Department of Agriculture struggles with the farm crisis.

Here, maybe on one of the inviting benches in a quiet cloister of the old Smithsonian castle, we may pause and reflect, halfway between the White House and Congress and the Court, about the things that unite and divide us.

But that's not the way it is. The struggle for power is building up — for the control of the Senate in this year's Congressional elections, and of the White House in 1988.

The press watches all this but is mystified by it. For, looking around, it's fairly obvious that the people who are running for President in 1988 are not really as qualified as the people who are not running.

Nor can it understand what may happen in the control of nuclear weapons in the world. All the reporters do is try to report the disasters when they occur.

It's not an easy job. Reporters around here are not really interested in separating the good guys from the bad guys, or worrying about all these television preachers like Jesse Jackson on the left and Pat Robertson on the right. They're just trying to report the news and make clear, when they can, how the politicians are trying to fool the people.

There is now an increasing conflict between the President and the press, and also between the press and the Democratic leaders of Congress. For in the struggle for control of the Senate and the White House, both parties are fiddling with the truth, and the press is trying to keep the record.

What is disturbing, at least in this corner, is that the voters seem to resent this effort by the press to keep the record straight. Every day or so, we have to listen to Larry Speakes — poor Larry! — proclaiming or explaining things that are obviously not true.

One of the major problems of the Reagan Administration in its conduct or misconduct of national and foreign affairs is that it keeps proclaiming things it would like to be true but aren't. And the reporters keep pointing this out, which infuriates the President and his image-makers.

But there's little doubt about who's winning this public relations game. The President dominates the tube. He may not make sense, but he makes news. □

It's not cheeky or nosy enough

Presidency on television, it's not nosy or cheeky enough to report what goes on behind the lovely facades of the official buildings.

When Bill Rogers summed up the tragedy of the Challenger's explosion, he said we were all to blame, including the press, and he was right.

Most reporters here, including this one, don't even know where these space characters in Washington hang out, or who they are, or where they came from.

The honest criticism of the press is not that it's interfering with official policy but that it doesn't know what's going on in the official palaces.

Take a ride around Washington on these lovely June evenings, from the State Department in Foggy Bottom to Capitol Hill — along Constitution Avenue, past the Commerce Department, the Labor Department, the Justice Department and the National Archives building, where they keep our memory, and the National Art Galleries where they keep our pictures and our dreams.

Nobody really knows what goes on behind these intimidating pillars, or